

**J. Arden Hopkin
History**



**Brigham Young University School of Music
Associate Professor of Music
Interview with J. Arden Hopkin
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School and education experience

I attended Brigham Young and got my bachelor's degree here. I went to the University of North Texas to get a master's degree, and I went to the Easton School of Music for my doctorate degree.

My student years at BYU were characterized by a lot of activity in the opera program, but I didn't have a really happy relationship with the opera program. I felt sort of used up and abused a little bit by the time I finished, and I've always had a little bit of trouble with being hemmed into a place and being viewed as only having one facet, and I felt like I was sort of being pigeon-holed. That wasn't the fault of the people in charge; it was just my peculiar personality. I remember being part of something that was really important; that was a student organization that started while I was here. Even though I didn't know it, the Harris Fine Arts Building was brand new the year that I came here as a freshman. I didn't know that it didn't have any more history than I did at the school. But towards my senior year, I got involved with a student think tank. We proposed that there be a large convocation done in the atrium of the HFAC where all the choirs and all of the orchestras would perform, and people would be in the lobbies and in the balconies above. That never came to pass while I was here, but after I returned here as a faculty member, I saw on the wall in the School of Music a picture of that event, and that was my original idea, and it was amazing to see it come to pass. As it turns out, the fire marshal eventually closed it down, so it didn't live forever.

Also, there were concerts at noon in my student days, but they were held in the Recital Hall. Whenever you'd get large organizations together and have them performing together in a reverberance base, it was really amazing.

The teacher at BYU that had the greatest influence on me was John Halliday, as a choral director and a voice teacher. I didn't have him as a voice teacher, but I admired him very much. He's a thoughtful, disciplined man, and I learned a lot from him. He was a choral conductor and I didn't do very much choral conducting in my career, but his way of dealing with people left a strong influence on me. He was a very positive man, he was a pretty disciplined man, and a fairly dry man.

For my master's degree, at first I was very excited to be at the University of North Texas. I got involved, heavily, in the opera program again. I held a choral assistanceship, so I carried on that tradition, but I got drawn into the opera program, and the man who served as my mentor as an opera director was my teacher. I had some very, very positive experiences. I was involved in some missionary work, not as intentionally as the church teaches us to be, but nevertheless it was really significant, and we went to the wards that had missionaries. They wanted to get people involved in missionary work. We said, we don't know anybody, but if you have investigators that you'd like to teach in our home, please bring them. They brought a couple over to our home within a month. That couple was from a drug culture, and so it was a little awkward for them, but we thought they were the greatest people. When they joined the church, their children and our children started to mingle together as friends. We started to have home evenings together, and

then my wife—one of the families she visit taught was a part member family, she taught the girl who was a member of the church. The boy was a member of the varsity basketball team at the university. They started coming to the home evenings; he joined the church. Then we managed apartments and there were some singers who had rented an apartment from the program. One day one of the girls came down to me and said, “You and your wife have something special, and I want to learn more about it.” She took the lessons. She was the lead singer in the school; it was a big deal for her to announce that she was going to join the church. Then, subsequently, another prominent singer in the school, who was kind of a wild child, came to me and said, “I’m going to join the church. I was very opposed to my friend joining the church, so I studied up on the church to convince her that she’d made a mistake, and I ended up convincing myself.” So she joined the church. And then subsequently, the man who played in the opera program, a graduate student—very fine pianist—and his wife joined the church. There was this group of ten or twelve new converts to the church that was too big for us to sit in our living room for a home evening. So we started breaking that up, and that magic time sort of ended. That was a great experience for us. But it led to some hostility, because it was a very conservative, sort of Baptist climate, and some of the faculty members in the school became angry with me for sharing the gospel, and so there was a backlash directed at me. That was a little painful. So I left my master’s degree with some mostly positive but very tainted attitudes about the school.

I wasn’t interested in being belligerent or confrontational, but it was a challenge. I just focused on my studies and tried to do the best I could without making any enemies. There was a certain amount of satisfaction that occurred at the University of North Texas that, at the time I went to get my doctorate degree, they recruited me hard. It wasn’t a very comfortable place for me, unfortunately, because of some of these experiences, and so I went to the Eastman school. That was a really magical place. It was full of really serious musicians, and it had the ghosts of great performers and great composers walking the halls. I was really, truly inspired by my education at Eastman.

I can remember being a very poor student and working on an opera. Rehearsals were downtown and we had a major blizzard come in to the point where the roads were closed. To get to my rehearsal, I had to walk to a bus stop. The problem was that I was wearing worn-out shoes that had holes in the soles; so by the time I got to the school, my feet were wet and I was cold. I had a wonderful rehearsal and there was some sacrifice involved, but it was a good experience. I performed in some operas; I had some of my first professional experiences singing in summer festivals and some of my most potent memories come from appearances on the Eastman stage. It was a huge theater, about 3,500 seats. That was a really big-time theater and a real honor to perform there.

Did you do some networking there that you’ve kept in touch with and use in your career?

No, not very much. I don’t know why; I didn’t understand the process of networking very well. I have maintained contact with some of the people, but the students went their way and I went mine. They were all single; I was married with a family, so we didn’t socialize

very much. Interestingly, I came here to BYU and after my arrival another man from the Rochester area, Andy Dabczynski, came and he had married a girl named Diane Green, whom I knew at Eastman. She was an undergraduate and was studying with the same teacher. She and I had gotten to be friends with each other and then years later here is Diane Green, now Diane Dabczynski. We crossed paths again and that's been a nice connection.

Professional experience at BYU

I've had some really good experiences reaching out across disciplines. My specialized interest is in Latin American music, so I've made contact with the Latin American Studies people and have some very cordial relationships with some in the Spanish Department and the College of Humanities as a result of that. I had an experience when I was over in Spain, teaching at a festival in Madrid, walking down the street with some of the BYU students and I heard my name called. I looked over, and there was the dean of the college of Humanities who had some students over there too. We met in the downtown streets of Madrid and chatted for a few minutes and went our ways. That was a fun experience. Subsequently, because of my associations as the voice pedagogist in our area, I've made connections with the Speech and Pathology people, Dr. Christopher Dromey, and more recently Dr. Christine Chandler. I have engaged in research projects with them and served on master's committees for their students, helped them design research projects, and provided support for them. That has been a very meaningful set of associations. I've learned a lot from watching their research. Within the department, it's been a little harder to make contacts. I've made wonderful associations among the voice colleagues, but the School of Music is kind of compartmentalized. We don't cross paths, and efforts that I've made in the past to cross those paths have not always been very fruitful. So, I wish I had better connections in my own department, but I don't feel like I do. I have one very, very close friend who's a music historian, Steven Johnson, and he and I share breakfasts together on a regular basis. That social interaction and the exchange of ideas has been really, really valuable to me.

I've also worked a little bit with the Drama Department, but not very much; my role didn't call on me to do that. In my university service I've had opportunities to serve on university committees where I got to meet and work with other people and I've enjoyed that, too.

I was hired at BYU to replace the opera director. Later, I was assigned to be the pedagogy teacher, which is a voice scientist. I wasn't a voice scientist; I wasn't a pedagogist, and I had never taken a pedagogy class in my life, but I was given that assignment. So, my first time teaching that class, I was two chapters ahead of the students. It was really not good, but it was better than what had been there apparently. I caught on and eventually I learned my craft and the students didn't seem to be any worse for the wear, because they didn't have anything to compare it to. That change opened a door for me to exercise my intellectual curiosity. My work as opera director was more practical and creative and not so very intellectual. I have a good and a curious mind, so that opened a channel for me ultimately to learn lots of things and test my skills intellectually.

And so I'm a much better person at the end of my career from that change that I hadn't anticipated.

Change has been incremental as I've gone along. I've had up moments and down moments; I've had occasions where I've felt valued, and other occasions where I've felt significantly devalued. That's just living.

When students say, "Thank you so much for your work here and for working with me," does that make any difference?

Yeah. That's been a really interesting thing. I just sort of do my job, I don't particularly think of myself as an important person, but people come back to say so. They've said that it wasn't just that I taught them things about music, but that I taught them things about life. I didn't really set out to do that.

I have a really strong continuing network with people and it's interesting that there are a number of students in that circle that were not my pupils. I was in the department, but for some reason or another they felt comfortable with me and we maintained ongoing relationships for twenty years or more. Now that I'm at the point of retirement, I watch my colleagues going through the process of deciding who they're going to hire, and I'm so grateful to not be involved in that process and to not have that responsibility any more. I've done it enough times to know how hard it is to make those kinds of choices about the future. I was gratified to see that the three finalists they brought back as potential replacements for me are all former students of mine. They were drawn from a list of fifteen or twenty that are former students of mine that have gone on and done well in their careers.

I think that any one of them will step in and be better than I was when I stepped in. I have the advantage of institutional memory and experience, but their training is better than my training was.

Changes made in the program

I didn't make many changes very quickly, but I was involved in some conversations that led to some changes. We ran a program called The Young Artists. It was an extended three-day, four-tiered audition process that begins to approximate some of the pressures that students will face in the professional world. That was my brainstorm. We now use a grading system that tracks student progress from the very beginning of their arrival to the time they leave. It has all of the jury scores and the jury comments and so on and so forth; a cumulative repertoire sheet. It's a very powerful tracking system, and was a brainstorm that I worked with in the Center for Teaching and Learning. That has become part of our program, and has made a significant change in the way we administer.

It's an online tracking system, and so students can look at the comments they received over the course of the semesters and see if the same comments are being made at juries.

We can do the same thing when we're evaluating; we can look back and see what we said two or three semesters ago and say, "This thing that I said hasn't been addressed yet."

The tracking system saves an enormous amount of paper, but it also puts in one place many tools that we can use. It has in the corner a little tracking graph that shows whether the student is on an ascending track or a flat line or declining line. An administrator can look at that or the teacher can look at that and say, "Hmm, I have someone who's not really making observable progress; we need to figure out why," instead of waiting until the end, and then saying, "Oh, we're at the end, and this student isn't really qualified to graduate." That's the biggest change that has made my job easier.

One of the things professional singers have to learn how to do is perform frequently under not ideal circumstances. On two separate occasions, I sought money, and was able to take students on tours, one to Brazil and another one to Peru and Chile. The Brazilian tour lasted for three weeks. I took people who were returned missionaries, Portuguese speakers. I put a program together and we toured all through Brazil, probably thirteen concerts in twelve days. We went to a concert and then we would catch a plane to the next city and we'd go on and rehearse. It was really an intense touring schedule. One of them said, "I love this!" His name is Nathan Pacheco, and he's gone on to a very successful career, first as a soloist with Yanni all over the world and now as a recording artist with Disney. He was the headliner for the homecoming spectacular recently. I also took another set of people to Peru and Chile, and of those people who went, one of them has caught fire and has kept going.

Fulfilling the role of BYU and sharing its role with students

I would say on one level, it's been very successful and on another level it's been unsuccessful. In terms of the personal contact and the mentorship that comes along with that, I've had lots of opportunities to interact with students and the interactions have been positive. There are a lot of people who have come away from their BYU experience feeling like they were fulfilled and valued, and that they learned, and have a positive feeling about their time here at BYU. In that sense, I'm happy I was a participant.

There's been magic in my life at BYU. I leave more positive than negative, and I'm grateful for the experiences.